

BALANCING POLITICAL HISTORY, ETHNOGRAPHY AND ART: THE ROLE OF A NATIONAL MUSEUM – SRI LANKA

Mrs. Sanuja Kasthuriarachchi, Director,
Department of National Museums, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

The National Museum of Sri Lanka was established in 1877. It has played a very significant role in the national life of the Sri Lankan people by protecting their national heritage. Until recently, however, specific functions of the museum were confined to documentation, preservation, and conservation of the cultural heritage of this multi-racial island, whose history goes back 2500 years. Colombo National Museum contains artefacts from Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic cultures.

Therefore I believe that the theme for this year's meeting and conference *Balancing Political History, Ethnography, and Art: the Role of a National Museum* is very relevant to my institution: Colombo National Museum, Sri Lanka.

THE COLOMBO NATIONAL MUSEUM, SRI LANKA

As I mentioned before, we are a multi-racial country. So, as the National Museum, we have to play a significant role in reconciliation between various ethnic groups and communities. For over 138 years we have served as the national repository of arts and artefacts, historical evidence and a platform for their ethnographic representation.

A museum does not merely preserve a nation's cultural heritage in a static manner. Through preservation and interpretation, a museum contributes to the national and cultural formation of a country. In a society such as ours, the rate of historical and cultural change increases daily. Many customs and items of tra-

ditional use pass into disuse, usually in tandem with socio-economic transformations that are taking place. Meanwhile, the formation of new cultural structures becomes a major national responsibility. This is deeply influenced by both internal and external factors.

The galleries in the Colombo National Museum are arranged under the following themes:

Political History Galleries

1. Pre and Proto Historic Gallery
2. Anuradhapura Period Gallery
3. Polonnaruwa Period Gallery
4. Transitional Period Gallery
5. Kandy Period Gallery

Art and Crafts

6. Stone Antiquities Gallery
7. Painting Gallery
8. Textile Gallery
9. Ceramic Gallery
10. Coins and Currency Gallery
11. Standards and Banners Gallery
12. Arts and Crafts Gallery
13. Arms and Armaments Gallery

Ethnography

14. Traditional Rituals Gallery
15. Traditional Agriculture Gallery

The first gallery provides information on world 'pre-history' and the evolution of man. The main hall is devoted to exhibitions on Sri Lanka's pre- and proto- history.

Dioramas, stone implements and megalithic burials provide a good source of evidence to study this period.



(Left) Diorama of Pre-History Gallery
(Right) Pre and Proto Historic Gallery
Images Courtesy of Colombo National Museum, Sri Lanka

Galleries 2 to 5 consist of a valuable collection of exhibits relating to historical periods in Sri Lanka. Originating in the 4th century BC, Anuradhapura was the first historical kingdom in Sri Lanka. The exhibition contains a unique collection of artefacts relating to the historical developments and the Buddhist and Hindu culture of that period.

Polonnaruwa Period Gallery reveals the multi-cultural heritage of this period with a large number of Buddhist and Hindu artefacts. This gallery has an excellent collection of Hindu sculptures excavated from Hindu Shrines in the area.

The Transitional Period Gallery provides good examples of the roles of cultures and communities which cross national borders and cultural objects that have been retooled over different historical periods. The Royal capital of Sri Lanka was shifted from the Dry Zone to the Wet Zone because of invasions. Hence the period between the 13th and 16th Century turned out to be a transitional era.

The trilingual inscription discovered from Galle inscribed in Persian, Chinese and Tamil, provides important evidence of Indian Ocean trade activities in the 14th Century.

In the Textile Gallery, there are traditional costumes representing all the ethnic groups in the country – the Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim, Malay and Burgher communities.

In Gallery 7, the visitors can view ancient mural paintings. This gallery is very important because original copies exhibited no longer exist insitu.

The ethnographic galleries in the museum present a collection of exhibits depicting the religious, economic and political life of the people. A number of very useful exhibits provide deeper insights into the rural life and agricultural economy of the country during ancient times.

The Colombo National Museum collection is the only place one can find enough authentic evidence to study the evolution of religions, art and architecture, paintings, Buddha images, carvings and motifs, agricultural and domestic equipment, masks, costumes and jewelry which make up the cultural heritage of the people of this country.

The following images will give you an idea of the rich collection that the museum has and how it represents and showcases the multi-cultural history and heritage of Sri Lanka:



From left to right: Buddha Image, Goddess Tara, Goddess Parvati, God Siva and Goddess Parvati
Images Courtesy of Colombo National Museum, Sri Lanka



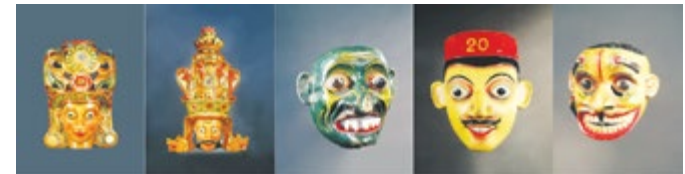
(Left) Tri-Lingual Stone Inscription
(Right) Traditional Sri Lankan Costumes / Flag
Images Courtesy of Colombo National Museum, Sri Lanka



Objects from Arts and Crafts Gallery
Image Courtesy of Colombo National Museum, Sri Lanka



Agriculture Gallery



Traditional Masks of Sri Lanka displayed in the Colombo National Museum



Chinese Ceramics displayed in the Colombo National Museum's Ceramic Gallery



The last King's Throne and Crown, Kingdom of Kandy
Images Courtesy of Colombo National Museum, Sri Lanka

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it is useful to look at the challenges faced in balancing the demands to provide adequate representation of political history, ethnography and art. The Colombo National Museum from its inception focused on mainly collecting objects from archaeological contexts that related to the major historical periods of the country's history. Therefore, its presentation of the political history of ancient Sri Lanka is extensive. The more recent political history of the country is presented in the Independence Museum. Due to the richness of the museum's collections, the

traditional arts and crafts of the country are also well represented. Despite having a large collection, the museum only has a few ethnographic galleries. Branch museums located in Galle and Anuradhapura provide greater insight into the life of the communities in these maritime and agricultural areas .

A significant shortcoming is the lack of adequate representation of all the ethnic groups in the country. Some of these groups are under-represented both in the museum's collections and in the exhibitions.